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MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

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RECURRENT *PRÉCIOSITÉ*.

In tracing the history of *préciosité* in France, three facts become clear: (1) that *préciosité* was not restricted to the age of Louis XIV, but existed plainly both before and after that period; (2) that it is a social phenomenon as well as a curious literary manifestation; (3) that it has made its appearance whenever a socially or artistically exclusive group of persons has been characterized by strong feminine influence or by an excessive artistic desire to mitigate the commonplaces of daily life by recourse to an idealistic or metaphysical conception of human affairs.

To observe and rightly to understand the entire course of *préciosité* we must start almost at the moment when French became a definite language and glance through the centuries down to the very threshold of the period in which we are living. We find it at every turn. It appears in a rudimentary form in the pretty dialogs and gentle punning of Chrestien de Troyes' romances,¹ in the subtle disquisitions of the Courts of Love, and in the tender passages of the *Roman de la Rose*. The *préciosité* is here chiefly sentimental. The great epoch of grammatical and linguistic discussion had not yet set in. The reigning mode of literary distinction consisted in the fashioning of delicate sentiments in a charmingly naïve style. Often, these compositions became extremely mystical and almost unintelligible, especially when the Laws of Love were the subject of controversy. Writers of romance turned metaphysicians. Ideas of love were rendered as nicely as, on the part of the scholastic debaters, ideas of religion, or, to express it more

¹ Cf. *Yvain*, ed. Foerster, 1891, l. 2013 ff. Also, the pun on Soredamor and *l'amer*, *Cligès*, l. 543-552.

accurately, points of theology. Stereotyped devices, dainty but affected, became part of the *précieux* rhetoric; animated little tricks of speech, like the intimate parlor *conversazione* of Chrestien and the playing on the name "Énéas" in the anonymous romance,² indicated the court-atmosphere, the aristocratic tone, and the feminine dominance in the circles for which these stories were written. They tell us much about the customs obtaining in the courts of Marie de Champagne, Aliénor d'Aquitaine, Alix de Blois,—the protectors *par excellence* of the romancers,—where the indoor social life of Provence prevailed, where hothouse gallantry flourished, where distinction was won by sentimental sublimation. There, the bluff language of the *chansons de geste* or the marketplace phraseology of the *fabliaux* had little following, particularly among the ladies. It is altogether probable that the romancers, with their *précieux* love and their *précieux* rhetoric, were encouraged by the high-born ladies as a revolt against the rather crude epics destined principally for the ears of fighting males. Social exclusiveness and feminine preponderance determined the quality of early *préciosité*.

Until the sixteenth century, these affectations, restricted to a small group of persons and not too much overdone as yet, scarcely attracted public attention. The feeling that French was a fixed language with strong national characteristics could have appealed to few. But when, as the result of overwhelming imitation of the Italians, the Greeks, and the Romans, some ardent patriots feared the ruin of much of the national structure, voices of protest began to be heard against the strange current into which the good, old, sane, plain French speech of their forefathers was being drawn. In one of Jacques Grevin's comedies, "il y a . . . quelque chose aussi des railleries qu'un siècle plus tard Molière adressera aux *Précieuses*,"³ and there were not wanting those who, toward 1550, complained that the poets 'hyperbolized' too much, and were damaging polite conversation.

To the poets in general, to the *Pléiade* in particular, and to literary and society women as an additional cause, may be attributed the strides which the *précieux* movement made in the

² Cf. *Énéas*, ed. Salverda de Grave, 1891, l. 8550 ff.

³ Bourciez, *Les Mœurs polies et la Litt. de Cour sous Henri II*, 1886, p. 297.

sixteenth century. To all of them, the French language seemed inadequate for esthetic purposes. Sometimes, the question was one of style; sometimes, of vocabulary; sometimes, of connotation. The latter difficulty appears to have been especially potent in the creation of metaphors and periphrases, and not without reason. It is quite well-understood that the French language throughout most of its career has been preëminently denotative. For scientific uses, this quality has been admirable, since it has made the word and the object coincide as nearly as possible by the removal of extraneous suggestion. But it has not been an unmixed good when taken in conjunction with subject-matter of esthetic import. For it is the special privilege, if not the strict duty, of all esthetic writing, not merely to describe or to define, but to suggest, to connote, to evoke. The outcome of the matter-of-fact French habit in language has been to clip the wings of fancy, to inhibit reverie, to limit the possibilities of collaboration between the author and the reader; and this *bourgeois* tendency, so inimical to art, the poets and the society women tried to overcome by innovations which, though hardly startling to us Anglo-Saxons, have always seemed objectionable and even ludicrous to Frenchmen fond of the 'good, old' French tongue, fearful of anything that may injure the three sacred principles of lucidity, and scornful of all that savors of insincerity. To call the ear the "gates to the understanding" strikes the average Frenchman as pompous, wordy, and unproductive. Fortunately, the real poets have paid no attention to their countrymen's asceticism in language. They have, at first, as in the case of the *Pléiade*, the Romanticists, and the Symbolists, had to suffer the stigma of *préciosité*, but they have finally been called poets.

The intentions of the poets and of the women in employing *précieux* language were probably not identical. That they had, however, one definite aim in common, cannot be doubted. They wished to react against the habitual dryness and prosiness of French style; and to realize how prosy and dry the older literature must have seemed to them, we have only to recollect the swift oblivion into which it fell at the beginning of the Renaissance. The women writers, of whom there was a multitude,⁴ might normally have

⁴ Among them may be named: Louise Labé, Pernette du Guillet, Gabrielle de Bourbon, Gabrielle de Coignard, Madeleine Neveu, Diane de Poitiers,

been expected to carry to extremes the innovations in round-about, pretty, unusual expressions. The repugnance of women to the short, sharp, direct word was likely to endear to them all kinds of circumlocution; and there is, perhaps, some justice in the remark of M. Bertaut: "Pensez à Mérimée, et songez qu'aucune femme, jusqu'ici, n'a écrit un chef-d'œuvre qui tienne en quelques pages."⁵ In the sixteenth century, women who wrote had influence in the various strata of society, and their contact with the poets was especially close.⁶ When, therefore, the *Pléiade* stood sponsor for new manners of saying old things, the women, many of whom were acknowledged disciples of Ronsard and zealous propagandists of his teachings, felt justified in the procedure which, partly as the result of their natural inclinations and partly as the result of the exigencies of court and drawing-room conversation, they had adopted with such noteworthy enthusiasm.

The poets of the *Pléiade*, nevertheless, by setting their official seal on those novelties in language which have usually been associated with the *précieuses* of the seventeenth century, did more for giving *préciosité* an honorable standing than all the other agencies together. In no indeterminate fashion, they encouraged the feminine ambition to invent singular expressions. Mlle de Gournay, Montaigne's spiritual daughter, who was extremely partial to Ronsard and his brigade, took a distaste to Malherbe's writings, "à cause qu'il retranchoit plusieurs mots de la langue, & qu'il ne se servoit point de Metaphores & d'autres Figures qu'elle aymoît. . . ."⁷ At Baïf's *Académie*, which met twice a week for literary and musical purposes, the linguistic reforms of Ronsard were put into practice; and women who had some literary or scholarly repute took an active part in these reunions.⁸ Associa-

Catherine de Médicis, la Duchesse de Retz, Mme de Villeroy, Henriette de Clèves, Suzanne Habert, Marguerite de Navarre, Elisenne de Crenne, Anne Bins, Marguerite de Valois, Mlle Le Jars de Gournay.

⁵ Bertaut, *La litt. féminine d'aujourd'hui*, 1909, p. 271.

⁶ Vallet de Viriville, *Hist. de l'instr. pub.*, 1849, pp. 259-260; the women in Baïf's *Académie*.

⁷ Cf. Charles Sorel, *Bibliothèque fr., par la Compagnie des libraires du Palais*. MDCLXIV, pp. 234-235. This statement, true enough on the whole, is not exactly correct, since Malherbe never entirely lost the taste for *pointes* or far-fetched metaphor, as M. Lintilhac has shown: *Litt. fr.*, I, 1894, pp. 304-305.

⁸ Vallet de Viriville, *op. cit.*, pp. 259-260.

tions of this sort undoubtedly stimulated some of the bizarre social customs of the times, later regarded as original among the *précieuses* of the seventeenth century. In fact, almost all the conceits considered peculiar to Molière's day had already been developed by the poets, the women, and the romancers before Henri IV came to the throne, and even the *Carte de Tendre* of the ingenious Sapho had a prototype in François de Billon's *Le Fort inexpugnable de l'honneur du sexe* (1555).⁹

It needs but a cursory examination of the manifestos of Ronsard and Du Bellay to convince oneself of the complete program for *préciosité* marked out by them. That their motives were laudable may be accepted without argument. The pernicious effect of their precepts can scarcely be said to have been visible in their poetry: for in our minds, at least, metaphor, periphrasis, and other uncommon locutions are perfectly permissible in verse and allowed as a constituent element of poetic diction. In prose, on the contrary,—and especially in conversation,—the free use of them is quite another matter and cannot stand the test of ordinary parlance, even in such works as Shakespeare's. Out of their native environment, these forms of speech readily become *précieux*. As has happened so frequently in history, misguided persons took a sound doctrine, applied it to something with which it was incompatible, and made it an instrument of harm.

Ronsard's proud boast,

“Ie vy que des François le langage trop bas
A terre se trainoit sans ordre ny compas:
Adonques pour hausser ma langue maternelle,
Indonté du labeur, ie trauaillay pour elle.
Ie fis des mots nouveaux, ie r'appelay les vieux,
Si bien que son renom ie poussay iusqu'aux cieus.
Ie fys d'autre façon que n'auoyent les antiques
Vocables composez et phrases poétiques,
Et mis la Poésie en tel ordre qu'apres
Le François fut egal aux Romains et aux Grecs,”

could not help inspiring the poets to go and do likewise.¹⁰ The manufacture of neologisms became a thriving industry. On the

⁹ Bourciez, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

¹⁰ Cf. Brunot, in Petit de J., *Litt. fr.*, III, pp. 782-783: “L'effet de paroles tombées de si haut fut immense. Il n'y eut poète en sa province—et tout

direct advice of Ronsard, adjectives were turned into substantives, as in the *précieux* phrase of the seventeenth century, *renchérir sur le ridicule*; adverbs and verbs were made at will from existing substantives, as *verner*, *vernement*, from *verne*, *essoiner*, *essoinement* from *essoine*; strange adjectives were coined; adjectives were, after the Latin, given the rôle of adverbs;¹¹ contrary compounds, like *doux amer*, *fière douce*,—favorites among Molière's contemporaries,—were formed; emphatic adverbs were abused, as in the anecdote: “‘. . . j’ouï un jour un sot, passant bien plus outre, en disant à une damoiselle: vous me plaisez infiniment en toute sorte d’infinité. Mais elle incontinent lui rendit bien son change, le payant de la même monnaie, vous me déplaisez extrêmement en toute sorte d’extrémité,’”¹²—forerunners of the *terriblement* and *furieusement* of the *précieuses ridicules*; diminutives like *faulzetttes mignardelettes* offered a particular attraction; unusual metaphors of the quality of *sourcil stoïque* and periphrastic epithets abounded; the employment of technical or trade terms was seized upon;¹³ complicated inversions in the order of words were not looked at with disfavor; clever and futile phrase-making had its fervent partisans.¹⁴ Even scholars like Henri Estienne, though ridiculing Italianized French, approved many practices which easily degenerated into *préciosité* and became *précieux* routine fifty or sixty years afterwards.

As has been indicated, scarcely a procedure scourged by Molière can be pointed out, which had not been given a fair trial in the

le monde alors était poète—qui n’apportât ‘sa gentille invention.’” Not only that, but these words were well-remembered in the following century when, for instance, Mlle de Scudéry approved them in her *De la Poésie Française*. See the edition by Sansot, Paris, M. CM. VII, with notice by G. Michaut: p. 27.

¹¹ Cf. Brunot, *ibid.*, p. 843.

¹² *Héros de roman*, ed. Crane, pp. 204-205.

¹³ Cf. Roy, *Charles Sorel*, pp. 277-286, for examples among 17th century *précieux*.

¹⁴ Cf. Olivier de Magny’s *Les Soupîrs: Sonet clxiiii*.

“Tant de divers pensers naissent de mon penser,
Que pour penser si fort je ne sçay que je pense,
Et en tant de façons mes pensers je dispense,
Qu’en pensant je ne sçay comment les dispenser.”

Cited by Bourciez, *op. cit.*, p. 406.

preceding century. Whatever may be true as to the general use of the term *précieux*, it can be proved beyond question that the *thing* was flourishing in all its ramifications long before 1650, long before d'Aubigné, in 1615, made sport of it,¹⁵ long before Charles Sorel observed its growth or the so-called Somaize chronicled its history, long before the Italian *prezioso* or the Spanish *precioso* became fashionable. Nor did it disappear after the first performance of the *Précieuses ridicules*, November 18, 1659, when Ménage, not a little addicted to *préciosité* himself, said, as he took Chapelain by the hand: "Monsieur—nous approuvions vous & moi toutes les sottises qui viennent d'être critiquées si finement, & avec tant de bon sens, mais croyez-moi, pour me servir de ce que S. Remi dit à Clovis; il nous faudra brûler ce que nous avons adoré, & adorer ce que nous avons brûlé."¹⁶ His prediction that the "galimatias" and the "style forcé" had come to an end had as much validity as all predictions which forecast a radical change in conditions based on perennially recurring circumstances.

No succeeding period in French literary or social history has been exempt from the evil. Each recrudescence has constituted a reaction against the homely speech of France. When this has not been done for reasons of invidious distinction, it has been done for motives of true poetic significance.

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HENRY VIII IN HALL'S *CHRONICLE*

Hall's authorship of the history of Henry VIII, in the *Chronicle* that passes under his name, seems never to have been called in question, though the doubt that he could have written it lies on the surface. Mr. Whibley remarks that up to the death of Henry VII, "Hall is a chronicler after the fashion of Holinshed and Stow,"—who of course had not yet written their chronicles when Hall's was published. "He accepted the common authorities," continues Mr. Whibley, "and translated them into his own ornate

¹⁵ D'Aubigné, *Foeneeste* (Flammarion, 1896), pp. 239-240.

¹⁶ *Ménagiana*, II, pp. 65-66.